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ABSTRACT

This brief summarizes the findings of significant research studies dealing with school district governance and the political processes of local school districts. The bulk of the discussion focuses on the research of Harmon Zeigler and his colleagues, particularly on the study described in "Governing American Schools," by Zeigler, Jennings, and Peak. Zeigler contends that although school districts are political units, the linkages between citizens and educational policy-makers are much weaker than suggested by the democratic model of American education. Rather, the policy-making process is dominated by professional administrators, especially scoool superintendents, instead of by elected school board members. The implication of this is that the traditional view of the schools as a service organization, rather than a political system, will be increasingly challenged, and the schools of the future will be faced by essentially political demands they are not presently equipped to handle. (JG)

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Each *Research Action Brief* reports the findings of significant empirical research studies on a topic in educational management. From these findings implications are drawn for the operation of today's schools, thus serving as a guide for enlightened administrative action.

School District Governance: How Democratic?

In the past fifteen years, political scientists have increasingly turned their attention to the political workings of the local school district. Long ignored because of their alleged insulation from partisan politics (a result of the progressive educational reforms at the turn of the century), school districts have only recently been studied with the rigor generally reserved for other more overtly political and partisan units of government.

L. Harmon Zeigler, a prolific researcher and writer whose work we highlight in this issue, sees school district governance as evolving in three phases. In phase 1 (from about 1835 to about 1900) the school district was truly governed by a lay board that supervised the hiring of personnel, wrote the curriculum, and chose the textbooks. As districts grew, the selection of board members in large cities came under the influence of urban boss-style politics. For all their venality, the political bosses did have at least the single virtue of responding to community values: "Boss Tweed's ward board of education . . . did not bother to enforce Protestant values in Catholic neighborhoods, allowed the various native tongues to be taught, and removed textbooks that contained alleged racial slurs about immigrant groups" (1977).

Phase 2 (1900 to about 1968) saw the consolidation of school districts and the substitution of the values of professionalism and efficiency for the values of local political control. The arbiter of the educational program became the professional administrator and his or her corps of assistants who tended increasingly to define district problems in terms of educational expertise. Zeigler describes this as a "class-based movement to shift the response of schools from laymen to experts."

In phase 3 (1954-1975) an equally radical change in governance took place. Schools came to be seen as the means of eliminating social and economic inequality. In the attempt to make schools the vehicle of social change, much of the effective control of districts passed from local superintendents to Congress, the federal courts, and other national agencies.

It is Zeigler's contention throughout his work that school districts are political units subject to political analysis. However, they are not governed by democratic principles as educational mythology suggests. The linkages between the citizenry and the policy-makers are too few and too weak for that. If, as Zeigler contends, school districts are not democratic units, what are they? Where does policy come from? What are the variables present in the policy-making process?

Evidence

The bulk of the material on which Zeigler bases his conclusions about school governance appears in *Governing American Schools.* For this book, Zeigler, Jennings, and Peak surveyed 91 percent of the board members and all but one superintendent in eighty-two urban and rural school districts. In addition, they made public surveys of attitudes about the public schools and

school boards. Using this material, they analyze the linkages between the three main agents in school governance: school boards, citizens, and superintendents.

School Boards: Membership and Selection

As Peterson reports, enough research has been done on board selection to enable us to make some generalizations about the process. Members are "usually chosen in nonpartisan at-large elections held at times differing from those for state and local elections." Because board members are universally elected "by only a small percentage of the eligible voters," and because the procedure is so sheltered, board members "are not beholden to groups or factions in the community but feel they can exercise their own good judgment in determining school policy."

Zeigler corroborates what other researchers have found. Generally, board members are more often "male, white, middle-aged, much better educated, more prestigiously employed, Protestant, devout, and Republican, and have been residents longer in their communities" than the general public. They have often been solicited to run by other board members or by members of public education groups like the PTA. One-third secured office either by "appointment or without initial electoral opposition."

According to Zeigler, the at-large, nonpartisan election of members depresses both the level of competition and the level of policy debate. The process of selection to the board is characterized by neither competition nor the airing of issues that accompanies competition. Zeigler concludes that the characteristics by which we measure the health of a political institution—that is, the "existence of controversy, the desire for change,' the restlessness with the status quo"—are missing in school board selection.

The Community and Citizen Groups

Several surveys have attempted to isolate the community variables that are important in school district policy-making. One of the most important surveys is Minar's study of forty-eight suburban elementary schools. He hypothesized that when it comes to decision-making, the "ability of a community to suppress conflict is dependent on its resources in certain kinds of outlooks and skills." He found that communities of high social rank (measured by education, income, and occupation) experienced less electoral conflict. People in these communities generally have greater professional and managerial skills to bring to problem-solving.

In the high-rank community, according to Minar, school boards (composed of a greater number of college graduates) "tend to see finance and capital-development as their most appropriate spheres of action, and personnel and 'minor policy' issues are best left to the administration." Low-rank boards are more likely to question personnel and "minor" policy decisions. Zeigler corroborates Minar and charges further that low-status boards are "overly concerned with administrative detail, failing to delegate authority over routine matters to the superintendents, and defaulting on their responsibility to oversee the general education program."

While much research has focused on the activity of citizen interest groups, Zeigler believes that "interest groups are far less influential than the case studies lead us to suspect." Zeigler set out to measure the "extent to which interest groups come to the attention of school boards." When board members were asked to identify the most active groups, the organizations most often cited were the PTA, teacher groups, left-wing or civil-rights groups, service clubs, and business and professional groups. The most potent group is the PTA, mentioned nearly twice as often as any other.

Zeigler divides the organizations into two issue-specific groups. The first group, without ideology (the PTA, the League of Women Voters, service clubs), provides "support for the ongoing system but inject(s) little conflict" into it. The second group is more ideologically oriented and is capable of creating conflict. Of these organizations, Zeigler found that left-wing groups were more active than right-wing or taxpayer groups in arousing educational issues. Generally, the existence of one politically active group creates an environment to draw in others.

The Board-Superintendent Exchange

In an attempt to isolate the sources of district policy-making, Zeigler and his associates examined the formal process of exchange between the school boards and superintendents in school board meetings. They observed who was responsible for setting agenda items, who put forward policy proposals, and who spoke on policy issues.

In about two-thirds of the districts surveyed, "the superintendent (and, in some cases, his/her staff) was ***solely*** responsible for setting the formal agenda for board meetings" (Zeigler 1976). Less than 10 percent of agenda items were forwarded by the public, other governments, and other professionals. When policy was formally discussed, school board members made 60 percent of the statements; the superintendent and staff accounted for 25 percent of the statements; the public, other governments, and other professionals accounted for only 15 percent of the statements. Zeigler (1976) concludes that "a picture of school officials talking among themselves emerges."

When policy was finally voted on, the superintendent's position was solicited in two-third of the cases. The mean response for adopting the superintendent's recommendation was 96 percent. In some districts, the recommendation was adopted 100 percent of the time. Zeigler concludes that the norm is for the superintendent to make a recommendation and for the board to concur.

Proponents for the notion of the strong superintendent claim that the superintendent's visibility enables him or her to keep in closer touch with the public's attitude on educational issues. Zeigler refutes this by demonstrating that while superintendents do receive more private communications than individual board members do, virtually all demands for action are received ***after*** an item appears on the agenda.

In short, by control of the agenda and through the power of his recommendation, the superintendent occupies the position of chief policy-maker. "At each step of the policy-making process," Zeigler (1976) concludes "administrators—especially superintendents—dominate school board members."

Opposition to the Superintendent

There *are* times, however, when school boards oppose superintendents. The willingness and the ability of the board to engage in successful opposition depend on several variables, among them role orientation, district size, the social status of the board, and the levels of community tension (Zeigler 1974a).

Role orientation: The greater the extent to which a board sees itself as "professional" (that is, identifying with the goals of the superintendent), the more it will see its proper function to be the communication of educational policy to the public. Members of this kind of board "rely more on technical expertise to resolve what they define as internal issues." Likewise, the superintendent's role is critical. His greatest resource is his expertise and his reputation as a politically neutral agent. To venture from this apolitical orientation in any but the largest cities lessens his chance of successfully opposing the board.

District size: In large urban and suburban districts, superintendents will face more opposition from school boards and other organizations than in rural districts. Paradoxically, even though opposition in urban districts is greater, superintendents have a greater likelihood of overcoming it. Zeigler suspects this is because an urban system is so complex that only the superintendent has a really comprehensive view of it. In addition, cities are more likely to have "factional" boards that split on major issues and relieve pressure from the superintendent.

In rural districts, on the other hand, the superintendent generally faces less opposition from his board. Organizational or group opposition is also less. However, rural boards tend to be "consensual." Because of a more homogenous population and a commonly shared sense of social values, the board will conduct its business with greater unanimity. Because the rural district is generally smaller and less complex, technical expertise counts for less than in urban districts. Rural boards oppose their superintendents less often, but when they do act the opposition is likely to be unanimous and effective.

Status: Zeigler's findings reveal that high status boards are more likely to oppose superintendents than low status boards, though they are less likely to press through to victory than the low status boards. The low status board usually regards the superintendent as an employee rather than a professional, and Zeigler warns that "aroused lower status boards usually spell trouble for the superintendent" (1974b).

Community tension: The amount of community tension significantly affects the amount of opposition a superintendent encounters. The superintendent enjoys the highest support when public demands are low. Involuntary departures of superintendents are associated with electoral heat. In large cities, community tension can work for the superintendent because he controls so many resources and because urban boards tend to be factional. In small communities, on the other hand, community tension of any sort works against superintendents. His or her safety generally lies in avoiding the arousal of issues.

Implications

To accept Zeigler's interpretation of the direction of school district policy-making, one must accept his thesis that "democratic theory is an appropriate standard by which to judge educational governance" (1974a). If indeed we define schools as a commonweal institution, that is, an institution in which "the

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public at large is the prime beneficiary" and over which the public is presumed to exert a democratic control, then it is clear that school district practices fall short of the ideal. Electoral competition is negligible, and elected representatives, in deferring to professional administrators, have failed to monitor the educational program. Instead of representing the will of the public in the district, school boards represent the interests of professional educators.

However, schools have often been defined as a service organization, which would put them in the same category as hospitals, mental health clinics, and social work agencies. This definition assumes that clients are not competent to judge and speak for their own needs. Service organizations depend on the expertise of professionals to make the policy decisions and to define goals. When school boards adopt the role of buffer between the school administration and the public, they are acting in accord with the theory of public schools as a service organization. In this respect, the data that Zeigler has amassed indict the schools as a political system, but not necessarily as a service organization.

The arguments for schools as either a commonweal or a service institution are complex. Is education an objective discipline about which there should be no public discussion? To what extent do schools reflect economic and social beliefs that can, and should, be influenced by citizen involvement?

If we subscribe to the definition of schools as political institutions, there are ways the linkages between citizens and boards could be strengthened. Zeigler suggests that school board members be paid salaries to encourage interest in and competition for the positions. Voters might elect the superintendent as they now elect mayors. To countervail the effect of the superintendent and his staff, boards might begin to hire staffs of their own.

But none of these innovations is likely to occur. More likely, schools will face a period of decentralization during which they will be broken into smaller administrative units on the theory that smaller units will be more responsive to the public. Zeigler foresees that decentralization might merely substitute a new elite for the old. Instead of business and education leaders, members of decentralized boards tend to be recruited from "various antipoverty organizations and established social agencies" (1974a). With such a board, the linkages between citizens and their schools are no more apparent than under a present centralized system.

Implemented correctly, decentralization might ideally be accompanied by experiments in democratic procedures of governance, such as the management team or participative decision-making. Much of the success of decentralization will be determined by the superintendent's ability to be receptive to, and translate, the educational needs of the community.

Whichever of the paths schools take, Zeigler feels that their definition as a service organization will be increasingly challenged. Schools of the future will be faced with demands that are nontechnical (student rights, racial problems, and so forth) and that the schools as a service organization are not equipped to handle. Zeigler grants that the perils of a completely open and democratic environment for the schools are great. But he concludes that "the costs of insulation from the community are even greater."

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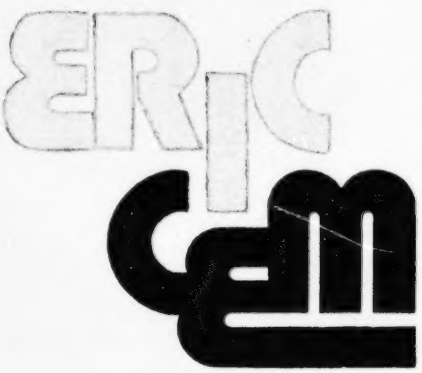

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